New Weapon System Calls for New Techniques

Employing the Bradley Stinger Platoon In Support of Task Force Operations

by Captain Douglas J. Waddingham

The Bradley Stinger platoon leader can't effectively command from a distant TOC. He needs to be forward on the battlefield to best influence the fight, author argues.

All photos by Greg Stewart

How should a Bradley Stinger Fighting Vehicle (BSFV) platoon fight when placed in direct support of task force/ squadron operations?

Few commanders understand the new benefits and tactics BSFV platoons bring to support TF operations. For many years, task forces and squadrons fought with self-propelled or towed Vulcans. Because of logistical challenges, these systems were split into sections and attached to individual CO/TMs. To the detriment of proper air defense employment, this simplified the Vulcan section's scheme of maneuver, allowing it to simply integrate into the CO/TMs orders process, rehearsals, casevac plan, etc.

While this plan briefed very well, it presented two major problems. First, both towed and self-propelled Vulcans failed to keep up with the faster Bradleys and tanks. Second, the platoon leader lost his ability to maneuver and emplace his teams at critical points on the battlefield. The combination of these two factors meant that air defense weapon systems were unable to mass combat power at critical times and defeat the enemy air threat. Now, with the advent of the BSFV, TFs can overcome these limitations.

The BSFV is a fully functional IFV with the addition of a two-man Stinger crew. The platoon is also equipped with an M977 for missile/ammunition resupply and an M113 for casevac and logistical missions. The BSFV platoon enables air defense to share the same speed and flexibility as its combined arms brethren. The challenge is educating both commanders and BSFV platoon leaders on the BSFV's capabilities and tactics in order to preclude commanders from employing their BSFVs using the outdated employment tactics of yesterday's Vulcans.

A BSFV platoon is designed to provide AD for the entire task force, not just one or two CO/TMs. The platoon leader must take the commander's air defense priorities and build an air defense design that includes early engagement, weighted coverage, defense in depth, and balance of fires. To provide this type of protection, the platoon leader must have the flexibility to maneuver all of his fire units. The old habits and SOPs of the Vulcan days set the precedent for S3s and commanders to task-organize the Vulcan sections with CO/TMs. This method of task organization is outdated and must be revised for the BSFV. The platoon leader must retain command and control. He cannot effectively command and control from the inside of a TF TOC. He is issued his own M2A2 to place himself forward on the battlefield, where he can best influence the fight.

He must be integrated into every step of the decision-making process in order to provide the appropriate type employment as the battlefield framework changes and develops. He is a key player and must brief his air defense design to the CO/TM commanders and task force commander. In each phase, everyone must understand the air order of battle and how air defense coverage must maneuver, adjust, and weight coverage to defeat the current threat. He briefs this AD design at the task force rehearsal. The platoon leader must conduct extensive platoon-level operations orders and rehearsals, to include mounted rehearsals. The platoon must understand the task force scheme of maneuver, air defense design, and commander's intent.

With respect to logistical self-sufficiency, the platoon's MTOE is equipped to support the platoon without being 'attached' to a CO/TM. The BSFV platoon sergeant supports his platoon in the same manner a first sergeant supports his unit. He must attend all CSS rehearsals. His resupply truck must be integrated into the trains, and during a battle, the platoon sergeant retains control of his resupply truck to expedite resupply. He coordinates Class III and casevac support during the CSS rehearsal. The platoon also utilizes the task force UMCP.

Under this new configuration, the platoon has the flexibility to mass at critical points on the battlefield. Fire units no longer follow an assigned CO/TM through the battlefield. This does not negate the ability of the commander to place a section with a CO/TM (if METT-T driven), but this is the exception, not the rule. The air order of battle and hostile air threat changes throughout the squadron's battle space, requiring the platoon leader to constantly maneuver and readjust his coverage. The platoon leader is focused on denying the most likely hostile air avenues of approach (AAA). This is where he will earn his money, because with only four firing units available, he is forced to "vote" where to emplace his assets.

The bottom line is that the platoon is now focused on shutting down the air avenues of approach threatening the task force, not AAAs threatening an assigned CO/TM.

In order for the platoon leader to maneuver his BSFV platoon, specific and rehearsed movement criteria are established in order to maximize AD coverage and eliminate fratricide. It is essential that every member of the platoon understands the commander's intent and air order of battle to guarantee fluid execution in the absence of orders and/or the loss of communication. A well rehearsed chain of command is essential.

These tactics have proven themselves lethal at National Training Center Rotations 98-01 and 99-01 and Joint Readiness Training Center Rotations 98-09 and 99-02. At the NTC, BSFV sections traveling 500-1000 meters behind and to the flanks of a CO/TM targeted by air were not only successful in defeating the air threat, they were credited with destroying numerous opposition forces targeting the TF flanks.

Not tying the BSFV sections to the CO/TMs allowed the BSFVs to become extremely survivable. Individual teams were not targeted by the OPFOR's chemical strikes, FASCAM minefields, etc. Situational awareness was achieved with a non-stop flow of information monitored and passed from the TF command net down to individual teams. Front line traces, chemical strikes, FASCAMs, enemy TRPs, enemy situation, etc., were annotated on squad and team graphics, painting a detailed picture of the battlefield. Teams cross-leveled information via the platoon net and the platoon leader passed critical information back up to the TF.

In summary, a BSFV platoon is a battlefield operating system that must have the freedom to be employed throughout the entire battlefield framework. This requires intense synchronization with the other operating systems, which cannot occur if the BSFV platoon is attached/OPCON to a CO/TM maneuver element.

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